

1947

Mail Boat of the Detroit River

D. R. Heath

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*The Mail Boat
of
The Detroit River*



Detroit's Floating Post Office

D. R. HEATH

This Book Belongs To

DENVER TODD

Machen sie mit dar baeckbringen
muy pronto, s'il vous plait!

The Mail Boat of Detroit River

Detroit's Floating Post Office

*The liner, she's a lady and 'er route's all cut and dried,
The man-o-war's 'er 'usband and 'e always keeps beside;
The freighter, she's a work-'orse, long time from days o' sail,
She never stops for nothin,' not e'en the bloomin' mail.*

Compiled and printed by

D. R. HEATH

1947

Dedicated to the boys in the little boat
at the foot of Twelfth Street, Detroit, Michigan,
who in all respects live up to:

*"Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night
stays these couriers from the swift completion
of their appointed rounds."*

♦

It was a long slow task for the writer
to produce this limited edition booklet,
but it was interesting in doing so. While
they last, \$1.00 each. D. R. Heath,
651 Barrington Road, Grosse Pointe 30,
Michigan

The Mail Boat of The Detroit River

THIS story is going to be told to you just a little differently than usual. As a rule you no doubt have read about this boat because a great many articles have been printed during the past years. Generally after you have finished, all you know about it, is that the boat is for the purpose of carrying mail and that so many pieces were handled, also maybe a few other facts, most all of which might be news, but to this writer, this is not what the philatelist is very much interested in; they for the most part would like to know something of the ideas leading up to the start of the service the boats themselves, the personnel, what is sent to the men on the ships and above all, a few pictures. With these thoughts in mind, we will try and present to you, a booklet of interest along philatelic lines.

Probably we will hear again that this is not the only boat of its kind in the world,—we've heard and read that now and then, but have yet to have had any proof offered of the existence of a similar boat. Admittedly, other boats do carry mail, lots of them no doubt, some carry freight to supplement its cargo, but here is a little boat that performs a *class of service* the like of which is, to our knowledge, not duplicated anywhere.

For the most part, the mail sent by this method is for the men on the ships, personal letters and a great many packages pass between the boats, these varying according to the seasons and conditions. There are also a few services that the boat handles, little of which is known or even mentioned, as many know nothing of them, except those who are directly interested.

It was the writers privilege to have seen all of the boats working at some time or other altho it is on the present boat that he had the most intimate contact with the men and their methods of handling the mail. He well recalls of passing up and down often, on one of the early gasoline powered yachts of over forty years ago, and seeing the mail taken off and put on board the ships travelling the waterway at Detroit. The operation always appealed to him then and still does, but never recalls seeing any articles published in the philatelic press in those early days. He now doubts that at that time, he ever gave much thought as to the "why" of this boat, and due to the lack of publicity it was next to impossible to find out. However, today there are a great many more research workers in philately, each to his own liking; so let us see what this is all about by assuming that you have been told of the service— and you too, are asking "why?"

* * *

For the purpose of starting the story, let us concern ourselves with a man on board on one of these ships, "freighters," we call them; while he is a very necessary part of the ship, he is given a very small part in our thoughts as concerns his contact with the rest of the world. Say that we take Jack, his last name does not matter, and assume that this spring, or possibly early in March, he left home to go to his ship for the season. Let us say right now, that on the Great Lakes it is customary to ship a crew for a whole season, differing from the salt water method of by the trip. The seasons naturally vary a little, depending on ice conditions, as all these lakes freeze over pretty solid every winter. As soon as the ice starts to break up and move out the harbors, the freighters leave their winter berths and according to their calling, go north, often through the Straits of Mackinac, or through the locks at Sault Sainte Marie, on up to Lake Superior, to ports there with a load of coal or even "light" to get their first load of iron ore, stone or wheat.

This routine goes on year after year according to business conditions, generally with an almost constant up and down the lakes until the latter part of November or quite often into December, for

those willing to take the risk of bringing down one more load before before the lakes and rivers freeze. All this time of course, Jack is on his ship, and very much a part of it, as his chances of getting home during the season are very slim. These freighters are for the most part are owned by companies who generally have a fleet of ships for their business. There is very little package freight carried into or through Detroit, the boats that do stop here are mostly loaded with stone, coal, some wheat, wood, pulp, oil and the like. By far the largest tonnage that passes on this river is iron ore but that mostly comes from Michigan's upper peninsula and unloaded in Ohio's many ports. Mixed cargoes are not common on these large lake boats.

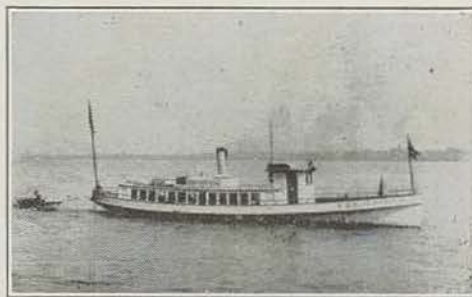
Movements of these freighters are scheduled with a severe regularity, almost like a railroad system; and with the modern methods of loading or unloading of cargoes, the time in port is very short, in fact it is but a matter of but a few hours for either operation. This of course does not give the men much assurance as to where they will be from day to day; he might be on a freighter loading ore in our upper peninsula scheduled to go to a certain port in Ohio. Now, if this could be depended upon, it would not be too bad, but occasionally it has happened that on the way down something causes the owners to have to order this load to another place, possibly due to congestion at the docks, breakdowns or other things. Shifting of orders such as this complicate Jack's problem of receiving his mail and to some extent the sending of mail by him. The Detroit Mail Boat eliminates most all of his worries along those lines as all he has to do is to have any and all of his mail addressed to him about as follows: Jack —, c/o S. S. "W. E. Riess," Detroit River Station, Detroit 22, Michigan. This name and boat will serve as an example as nearly every ship on the Great Lakes passes through the Detroit River at fairly regular intervals, depending on their routing. Mainly, on the list of those served by this "Floating Post Office" are boats that travel on strict schedules from Lake Superior to Erie and Ontario, also before the World War II, a surprising large number of boats of foreign registry.

It will thus be seen that this little boat, so often seen on the river here, is in reality a central melting pot for the lake seamans ex-

pectations, and who does not place the receipt of letters as the culmination of your expectations at times? The mail received here is brought from Roosevelt Park Station, Detroit's main distributing point, from eight to twelve times a day, as the Mail Boat is in all reality a Branch Post Office, with all personnel and equipment in proportion to their requirements.

* * *

Of course it was not always possible for these men to receive their mail in this present manner, although there were provisions of a sort available even back in 1874, when Captain J. W. Westcott established a marine reporting service and a vessel agency here in Detroit and in the early 80's, E. J. Kendall did likewise at Port Huron, Michigan, on the St. Clair River.



The "Florence B.," Detroit's first Mail Boat. 1895 - 1907

Primarily, their objects were to offer a service to the ships and their owners, to both report the whereabouts of their vessels, also to deliver orders to the masters, however it quickly developed into a messenger service. The men operating the actual contacts did so from small rowboats, putting on board packages, express, some mail and very often, people themselves by means of a rope ladder. A record was kept of all boats passing these ports and those owners who subscribed to this service were notified, which kept them posted as to their ship's progress.

Naturally anything assigned for delivery by either Westcott or Kendall to passing ships was more or less at the sender's risk, espec-

ially in the case of mail as the Post Office Department could not assume the liability; mail and such had to be consigned to these carrier, who held for delivery as that particular boat passed. The operations involved in getting aboard whatever items there might be, were extremely hazardous, even with the slowing down of the large ship. The row boat, which came out from shore had to approach close enough to the freighter's side, throw a line to someone aboard, thus be towed while making the transfer of articles, etc., this being accomplished by means of a rope with a large pail attached. Anything to be sent ashore came down with the pail or tied to the rope. The operations completed, the row boat was cast off.



The "C. F. Bielman, Jr." Mail Boat, 1907 to 1932

While these services were of a private nature, they proved such a necessity that the lake carriers insisted on their continuation. To some extent much of this work is being offered by the J. W. Westcott Company who still operate on the Detroit River. altho for many years have been using power boats. However, during the latter part of the 1880's, a movement was started in the Detroit Post Office to have the mails handled by the Department itself and handle the delivering of its own mail directly to the ships. No doubt back in those days it may have appeared a rather far-fetched idea when presented to the heads of the Department in Washington. It struck all kind of political snags there too, looking very unfeasable to them.

However, the plan had one very consistent champion in Charles F. Swan, who was the Superintendent of City Delivery at the Detroit

Post Office. Mr. Swan had been in the service for many years and in his capacity had a good understanding of the needs of the lake sailor. It was his keeping this idea out in front that really put the Mail Boat finally across. In this he was backed up by Charles F. Bielman, who was an officer of the White Star Line of this city and eventually it was he who took the first contract for delivery of mail to the ships passing up and down the river.

The handling of the various items such as were put aboard were charged for by the Westcott and Kendall Companies, but Mr. Swan insisted that they were entitled to get mail delivered and picked up, so after a long fight the idea was at last given a trial. Detroit, due to its position on the waterways was chosen and the contract with Charles F. Bielman started on June 17, 1895.



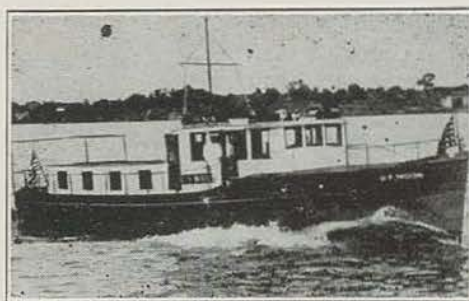
The "G. F. Becker" Mail Boat, 1932-1936.

In those days Detroit's Main Post Office was located at Griswold and Larned Streets; the Mail Boat, "Florence B" was operating from the foot of Bates Street, one block east of Woodward Avenue. Near by in a building that was used for years by the Detroit and Windsor Ferry Company was housed the "Detroit Marine Station" Post Office. Here, in this little office was received and distributed all mail assigned to ships, being made up and placed on board the Mail Boat when those particular ships were expected to pass by.

Pictured elsewhere is the "Florence B." and the little row boat being towed at her stern. The actual contacts which, while hazardous, were made so smoothly that the real danger was scarcely ever

realized by those watching. As a comparison, the small boat was about eighteen feet long and the lake freighters were from two to six hundred in length. Even with these big fellows slowing down to take on mail, there was still a very heavy swell of water at her bow and a dangerous suction caused by the propeller at the stern. These had to be avoided by the man in the smaller boat and so well was this done, that notwithstanding the thousands of deliveries made during many years by this method, there never was a serious accident reported and but one "tip-over."

As to the boat "Florence B.," the facts are a little vague as to her origin, however the registry record states she was built of wood in Detroit during 1892; powered with steam, 50.8 feet long by 11 foot beam. It does seem to the writer that the boat was a little old-



The "O. F. Mook." Mail Boat, 1936 - to date.

er than this, but he may be wrong, however records were none too accurate, especially of boats of small tonnage. Previous to 1895, possibly under another name, this boat at one time, was used to carry patients to the old steamer "Milton Ward," anchored off Belle Isle, and used by the City as a contagious hospital. However, it must be stated to the credit of these far-sighted parties, that the service was a big success, 47,000 pieces of mail being handled the first year.

Certainly some credit is due to John J. Enright, who was Detroit's Postmaster from 1893 to 1897. It has been said that he was very much in favor of giving the idea a trial, although it was he who had to face all the arguments of opposition to starting the service.

Primarily, it was intended that the deliveries were to be made by the man in the small row boat but very often it so happened that while this man would be busy with one freighter, another one would come along, so it became necessary for the steamer to make the contact. In an article published in "Postal News" of December 1899, a magazine circulated around the postal personnel, it mentions the service of the boat, stating that during the winter that she was being rebuilt to give her greater speed. Well, next spring she looked just the same, but there was at least a new boiler on board. Boats of the build of those days could only be driven just so fast. The boys who rode the service on the "Florence B." tell with a laugh or two, that during her last years a standard piece of equipment aboard was a bundle of shingles to use when a leak was found. After the termination of Captain Bielma's contract in 1907, he sold the little boat



Cabin and top deck of the "O. F. Mook" showing method of storing the overflow of parcel post and bulky packages.

to a Canadian firm, who took her to Port Arthur on Lake Superior, where, after two years of service, they finally scrapped her. The boat was named after his wife.

The first men who operated in Detroit's Marine Station were as follows: Charles Jacklin, Clerk-in-Charge; E. J. Carmody, Clerk; William Yates, Marcus L. Randall and John H. Hammer. These were the men who "worked out" the mail and delivered it. They were not connected in any way with the contractor, they all being Post Office employees, the operating of the boat being up to the party holding the contract, who furnished boat and suitable crew.

The writer recalls that some time around 1906, if he remembers rightly, a new boat while under construction at the Michigan Yacht & Power Company yard, caught fire and was destroyed before being much beyond the hull stage. Possibly this was to have been the boat that took the next contract.

One incident, probably known to a very few people, is that the 11th Annual Convention of the National Association of Letter Carriers held in Detroit, September 3-8, 1900, used as their Souvenir Badge, a circular bronze medal, (39 mm) showing the old Post Office located on Fort Street, as the obverse and on the reverse, a scene on Detroit River showing a two masted steamer with the mail service row boat at her port side; the steamer "Florence B." coming up a-



Sorting mail
on the
"O. F. Mook"

stern to pick up her carrier as he casts loose. The odd thing about this, while a very attractive design, it depicts a very unusual circumstance, that of a delivery being made to a passenger boat. Of course, it was possible, but is seldom done. The large boat was evidently the "Northland" or "Northwest," as she had three smoke stacks.

Around the central design of the badge medal are the words "The Only Free Marine Delivery Service In The World," and interposed is a small oval design of the conventional foot mailman on his route.

During 1900 the Marine Station was moved to the foot of First Street in a part of the old Michigan Central Building. About five years later due to remodeling the depot, the office moved across the street to the old Wayne Hotel, which overlooked the river. Samuel Colbert was the Superintendent up to, and at this time.

That the service to the ships and of course to the men on them was appreciated is shown by the fact that at a meeting of the Lake

Carriers Association, (the ship owners to you,) passed a resolution of thanks to the Postmaster of Detroit and Carriers at their winter meeting in January 17, 1900. 257,377 pieces of mail were handled during the season of 1900.

* * *

The contract bid of 1907 changed from father to son. Charles F. Bielman, Jr. took over on July 1st with a new boat, the "C F. Bielman, Jr. This new boat was built at Ferrysburg, Michigan, of steel, 67.5 feet long, 14 foot beam; 23 net tons capacity and powered with a 160 hp steam engine. The system of handling the mail was just the same as on the previous boat, the row boat and all. As with the "Florence B." the part assigned for the use of the carriers was just aft of the wheel house and forward of the engine and boiler room. This necessitated passing through the pilot or captain's quarters each time a delivery was made. With a mail bag or so, also packages it must have been a rather mixed up condition at times. Well, nothing was done about it until a long time afterward.

Approaching a freighter to put mail on board.

Note the use of the boat hook to bring the mail bucket on board the Mail Boat.



During the winter of 1927-28 when the boat was hauled out, they put a companion way aft of the wheelhouse cabin. This meant that the carriers now had an entrance of their own to the part of the boat assigned to them.

Now comes the part of a change in the policy and system in the handling of the mail and in doing this the Mail Boat became a boat of a different status. During the latter part of 1927 an inspector from the Post Office Department came to Detroit and went out with the boat on a regular routine trip. There was nothing unusual about trip, or the inspection either, but for some reason or other his report caused the discontinuance of the row boat, so since the season of 1928

the Mail Boat has made all contacts with passing boats. Also still another event which changed the standing of the boat from that of just a "Mail Boat," to that of now being a "Floating Post Office" and again, the boat's operating point was changed from Third Street to the foot of Twelfth Street, from where, today, 1945, the service is still going on.

All this was done in 1928, so the inspector's report and recommendations must have been far reaching. The Branch Post Office, now called the "Detroit River Station" was completely removed from a land location and placed on board the "C. F. Bielman Jr." thus just as stated, the whole Branch Post Office really floated. The former cancellation "Detroit Marine Station" was changed in 1920, due to the great similarity to the "Detroit Main Station," especially if not clearly struck. To avoid further confusion, the boat, which of course was now a branch of the main Detroit office, became known as the "Detroit River Station, Branch No. 1." It still operates under the same name today.

Contact made,
now ready
to cast off.

Loose mail in
bucket; pouch
tied to rope.



Early cancellations of the "Marine Station" are very scarce, particularly before 1900. The writer has two covers, one on a Spanish-American War patriotic dated July 1898 and the other, a 2c stamped envelope dated 1899, both of which he prizes very highly. Due to the fact that for years, philatelists knew nothing of the Mail Boat, it could be assumed that all of the early cancelled covers really came from the ships to shore and were not just sent to the boat for the cancel itself which is done by many today. It might be said that good clear cancels on covers before 1910 should be worth at least \$1.00 each, the earlier ones should be worth a little more. Elsewhere you will find the three types illustrated, these all being the hand type with killer attached; and

of course are only applied to mail originating at this boat, many earlier ones will show the back stamp of the main Detroit Post Office, "In Transit."

* * *

In June 1913, occurred a little incident that had many of the Post Office people a little puzzled as to its explanation. "History" has it that a special flag was awarded the Mail Boat by a special act of Congress. Those of the old timers who saw it, say that it was about 6 feet long by 4 feet high, pennant shape with a "swallow-tail." It had an American Eagle with armoured breast and the words "United States Mail" in white letters. Made of blue silk with border stripes of about 8 inches wide, top and bottom in red, it was not a practical flag to fly at a mast head, so it was only seen on special occasions, being taken back assumedly, to the Post Office. Finally it disappeared and it seems that nobody has any idea as to where it might be. Some five years ago, think he might discover the real source of this flag, this writer started an investigation. In Washington to date, there is nothing available as yet. No record of any "act of Congress" either has been unearthed. It surely remains a mystery, but a duplicate of the original having been made in 1932, we at least can reproduce it for you. It has very seldom ever been flown by the boat. After the boat went out of this service she was sold to Captain Nicholson of the Nicholson Transit Co. of Detroit, who converted her into a yacht for his own use. At this writing, the boat is called the "Dove."

Everybody
happy.



* * *

In 1932 the contract with C. F. Bielman Jr. ran out and on July 1st, Frank Becker took over with a boat, the "G. F. Becker," named after his son, Gerald F. Becker. Built in Toledo, Ohio, of steel, elec-

trically welded, the boat was towed to Detroit and a Fairbanks-Morse 5 cylinder, 125 hp diesel motor was installed. The boat was 64 feet long, about 15 foot beam and was 29 tons net had been designed for this particular class of work by having her wheelhouse aft of the cabin, thus giving clear access to the whole forward deck for the men while making deliveries. Those men who have had experience on all the boats have always been agreed that this feature made the "G. F. Becker" the best for their purpose as they inevitably use the bow of the boat for making the contact then follow alongside until completed.

When the "Becker" went into service the first philatelic recognition that was ever given this mail service as far as known, was made by the Detroit Board of Commerce, who sponsored a cachet to be applied to any letters which were to be sent them previous to the date. This was a rubber stamp and as far as known, were all in blue. Members of the Michigan Stamp Club assisted with the applying of the cachets. The number sent is not known.

Marcus Randall
and
Oliver F. Mook
on deck of the
"O. F. Mook"



The "Becker" served the shortest time as the Mail Boat, just one term, four years. At the end of that time, J. Frank Becker used the boat as a tug for towing, etc. around Detroit. In the spring of 1942 the J. W. Westcott Co. chartered her for use in their work on the river, replacing their own boat which was lost by fire the year before. They used her about a year and the boat is still around these parts.

* * *

The Mook Ice & Service Corp. won the contract in 1936, so on July 1st of that year, a new boat, the "Oliver F. Mook," took over. A steel boat, 65 feet long, 14.9 foot beam, built by the Defoe Shipbuilding Co. of Bay City, Michigan, powered with a Kermath-Her-

cules, 6 cylinder diesel motor of 165 hp. The boat, built as were the first two has the wheelhouse forward with companionways just aft, allowing easy access to the Post Office proper. As was the case with the "Becker," this boat, also is one-man operated; the steamers required an engineer as well as a wheelsman.

It might be well while we are on this boat, to describe the part of the boat assigned for the use of the Postal clerks; the other parts, while of course essential, are just like other boats and have no bearing on this story anyway. You go aboard on the "Mook's" port side as she always lays headed "upstream" when at her dock; we enter the companionway, down about four steps and into the "main office" of the Detroit River Station Post Office. A "room" about twenty five feet long and approximately the usable width of the boat. In the center a work table is stationed upon which all mail is placed when sorting also after receiving mail from ships, for these pieces have to be cancelled before being sent ashore. Just back of this table, (or aft, to be more correct) is a partial partition which reaches the ceiling, one side is used as a bulletin board, the other has sorting "pigeon holes" as has almost every inch of space everywhere else. A little further aft is the Superintendent's desk, which like all "furniture" on this boat, is also well fastened down. This desk is the "office" of this branch, here all records, all stamps, etc. are kept and all money letters received from the men on boats are recorded. On either side of the room are more pigeon holes, in an ordinary Post Office these no doubt all would have street names; but here are names of boats, boats and more boats. There are approximately 775 of them, which represents a rather sizable city. On the deck is space provided for packages that take too much room below, however, since the picture (illustrated) was taken, a canvas cover was installed for weather protection.

* * *

Now that we have read a little about the four boats that have served the lake seamen all these years, let us go back and follow the mail from "shore to ship" and "ship to shore" just as though you were going along with it.

AS you no doubt have noted that "contracts" have been mentioned, so we will state that bids are submitted on a four year basis, being advertised from the Detroit Post Office. The winner is to furnish a suitable boat, subject to approval of the P. O. Department, also a complete crew. The mail is handled by men from the local Post Office and are absolutely independent from the boat's operating personnel. Inasmuch as this is a twenty-four hour service from the opening of the season to the end, it requires three crews, one for each shift generally working from 7 a. m. - 3 p. m.; 3 - 12 midnight; 12 - 7 a. m. each day, seven days a week.

It happens that the "season" is regulated to some extent by the weather and of late years, by the demands of war; it will vary each week or so, but as a rule starts from April 6 to 15th running up to December 12 to 15th also depending on the severity with which the winter sets in. Even before the Mail Boat goes into commission, a few of the Lake Carriers will notify the Post Office here, that this or that ship will go out on so and so date, so with that information all mail will be sent to the Mail Boat and delivered as usual as they pass through Detroit. Other mail just follows in automatically.

Almost every piece of mail delivered in Detroit passes through Roosevelt Park Station as a distributing point. Any mail etc., may be addressed to any one on a ship which will travel up or down this river. This mail is bagged and delivered to the River Station anywhere from eight to twelve times a day of twenty-four hours. The Mook Ice & Service Co., the contractors, at present, have an office at the river's edge and the "Mook" is docked directly behind. The delivery truck ordinarily puts the mail on board the boat but occasionally when the boat is out on delivery, the mail is left in a room provided at the rear of the office.

Probably you might be puzzled as to how these men know when a certain ship will be coming along. The fact is, that they really do not always know, except when the boat is on a definite run; in this case they are almost on a schedule, which excepting for bad weather or delays by fog, can be depended upon almost to the hour. On this page is a sort of reproduction of "Vessel Passages" as refers to Det-

troit itself. It is doubtful whether many people ever read the column, but it is very important to the Mail Boat boys. This is one of the J. W. Westcott Co. services; these ships were but a few of over fifty that day. The "ar" and "cl" stand for "arrived" and "cleared" and give the movements of the ships named, however, there another list which is very much used also. This lists the ships passing thru the locks at Sault Sainte Marie, more commonly called the "Soo." Certain Detroit papers carry this listing and as the paper is received on the Mail Boat, these names are immediately posted on the bulletin board with the location and time as given. From this, the time of reaching Detroit, can be estimated, so well do these men know the speed of the various freighters.

Detroit Vessel Passages

JULY 18

UP

| | P.M. | | P.M. |
|-----------------|-------|-------------------|-------|
| Hulst | 10:30 | Yosemite..... | 6:05 |
| Hy Ford cl .. | 10:35 | Glenig ar | 8:40 |
| Blue Cross..... | 4:25 | H. R. Jones | 11:55 |

DOWN

| | A.M. | | P.M. |
|-----------------|-------|--------------------|-------|
| W. G. Mather .. | 10:10 | Dow Chem. cl | 6:10 |
| LaSalle..... | 11:00 | Watt ar..... | 8:00 |
| Buffington..... | 11:45 | Mantadoc..... | 11:55 |

The mail is sorted by the name of the ship and placed in their pigeon hole, these being arranged in alphabetical order. At times, of course, there is an overflow, so the excess goes into mail sacks, if it is parcels or other mail too large to put into the case provided, and if they are crowded for room, a large red tag marked "Roof" is put in the pigeon hole and the sack or sacks are placed up on the deck, out of the way. If not too crowded, and the packages can be stored inside, a blue tag marked "Parcel Post" is placed in the regular mail space. These tags indicate to the clerk when he reaches for the mail for the approaching ship whether there is more also as to where it is. Mail that accumulates between trips is very apt to be put on the deck or roof as naturally it cannot be delivered until the next trip of the ship named.

There are always two men on duty in the mail room plus the Superintendent, who generally is on the day shift, and it may be said that there is always someone on watch for ships; even the Captain is on the lookout. Ordinarily the boat is tied up at her dock, but upon sighting a ship, they pull out toward the center of the river, approaching in a quartering angle until about ten feet from the ship on the deck of which some seaman is following along awaiting the chance to hang his "mail bucket" over the side; at this point one of the mail clerks reach for the rope with a long boat hook and draws the pail to the deck and into the hands of the other mail clerk, who first removes any mail; puts in that for the ship, and if there is any extra in a sack or so, this is tied on as explained before. Then, reversing procedure, the boat hook eases the bucket out where it is hauled up and on board where it is distributed. The photos, taken by the writer and reproduced herein, show the highlights to some extent.



The first cancellation in use from 1895 to 1920, the second up to 1941.
Both are 25 mm in diameter.

If there are other ships in sight, they take care of them, then go into their dock, cancel the in-going mail, carry out any instructions that may be sent in, such as orders for stamps, which will be kept in readiness for them upon their next trip; or money orders, which are sent as requested. Many telegrams are sent ashore by placing in an envelope with a three cent stamp on it, addressed to the telegraph company; upon reaching shore, a messenger is called at once and upon delivery, the Mail Boat's duty is completed. There have been times when the boat will be out in the river for an hour or longer when the ships come through in great numbers, especially after a

fog, or after bad weather, when the ship generally lay-to and then come through in "bunches."



The cancellation in use today;
30 mm in diameter, has
been used since 1941.

The foregoing tells in a more or less complete way the mechanical methods of handling the mail going to the seamen on our lake ships. It might be well to say also, that while up to now, we have referred to these men as "clerks," so as not to confuse you too much, but in reality they are more properly known as "carriers," as they are in the same category as the mail carrier who delivers the mail to your home, with two exceptions. As there are special qualifications necessary for this work, which is classified as hazardous, some experience on boats is almost required. Several of the carriers have had navy, lake seaman or fishing experience or had been with either the Kendall or Westcott companies. Again, due to the risks involved, these men draw a "bonus" pay, which is added to their base and is paid to them on a pro-rated monthly pay. During their "off season" these carriers are assigned to other branch offices in Detroit, for about the four months of the year that the boat is not in commission.

To those not familiar with ships it seems remarkable how these boys can identify the freighters from the distance they do. Their dock has a fairly clear view up and down the river, from which they can see the boats and the general shape and if visible, the bands that are painted on their stacks are a big help. Again the "vessel passage schedule" can be used, the time from the "Soo" is figured from 18 to 20 hours and as they pass Port Huron, their time is telephoned in by the ship reporting agency there; this means that ship will be along in about 5 1/2 to 6 hours. As they come up the river, they are report-

ed as they pass "Lime Kiln Crossing," near the lower end of the Detroit River. Yes, there is a telephone on board the boat.

One of the most interesting trips the writer has ever taken on the "Mook" is one taken at night. Lights of approaching freighters are visible but as the Mail Boat nears the ship a searchlight is flashed on her stack and bow, the band on the stack identifies the owners, and the bow, the name. As the contact is neared, the strong flood lights on the side of the Mail Boat toward the ship, are turned on with the result that it is as easy to carry out operations as in daylight. One of the carriers as a rule, is on deck, awaiting the identification of the ship being approached, then calls the name to the other man, who then rushes onto the deck with the mail for the ship called out. Outside of the short interval of uncertainty the whole process is done so smoothly that you scarcely realize that it is dark.

It used to be thought necessary that a signal be used to indicate mail going aboard or to be picked up. One long, one short and one long whistle by either ship or Mail Boat was the signal for transfer of mail and in older days, sailing vessels flew a white flag by day and a flashing bright light at night. This has all been done away with although the rule still stands; hardly a ship now goes through but that gets mail; it's not necessary that they slacken their speed, also the regulations that boats sending or receiving mail were to enter the American side of the channel for this purpose are not always strictly observed, as the ship traffic is pretty heavy at times; with three or four of these big ships passing here at one time, the carriers on the Mail Boat do not take time to see if that particular boat is just so many feet inside the International Line. They live up to their old tradition, "to never miss a ship."

The mention of the International Line, brings up a situation, possible when our local rate was two cents; we here in Detroit, could address a letter to a party on a foreign boat and have it delivered to them, even on the Canadian side of the river! Many ships with foreign registry pass through here in normal times and often receive mail. With some imagination, this might be said to upset the foreign postal rate, as these are considered "foreign bottoms."

Starting with June 17, 1944, this mail service started on its fiftieth year of service and it was quietly rumored that Detroit Postal authorities were hoping to have a stamp issued by the Post Office Department to commemorate this branch of their service. In all probability, were it not for the World War II, this might have been carried out, but those who had hoped, were due to disappointment. However this event was not to go by without some recognition, even if there was to be no stamp; below is shown the "Mailomat Meter" by Pitney-Bowes Postage Meter Company of which there are three machines in Detroit, two at the main down-town Post Office, the third, in the General Motors building. On the 17th of June, 1945, this meter was placed in use on all three, with the expectation that the machines at the Post Office would be in use during the period of navigation this year. It is estimated that possibly 3500 pieces of mail were given the first day cancel.



The Pitney-Bowes meter on the "Mailomats" here in Detroit

As mentioned previously, a service that these freighters get and of which little is known is that with every contact made, a Daily Weather Map is placed in the mail bucket with other mail. This is furnished by the U. S. Department of Agriculture with offices in the Federal building here. It's a single sheet about 11 by 16 inches in size. Also another very important piece of "spot news" sent aboard is "Hydrographic Information" issued by the Navy Department from an office near the "Mook's" dock. The information contained in these sheets may tell of wrecks, obstructions in channels, changes or removal of buoys, all very important to navigation. The sheets may vary in number and come to the Mail Boat just as often as issued, are 8 by 6 1/2, mimeographed on white for general lake data, on a red paper for Detroit River and green for Lake St. Clair and St. Clair

River. These reports are sent out in a penalty envelope marked "Up" or "Down" and are distributed accordingly to which direction the ship is headed. Every Friday, a summary of this data is printed and sent out for the ship's navigation files.

In days gone by, it was estimated, how accurately we really do not know, that at one time there were about 1100 vessels, counting sail and steam, that could avail themselves of mail service in passing Detroit. Today of course, sailing boats have "gone with the wind" and the much larger freighters have eliminated many of the smaller ones of the former days. However there on the list of the Mail Boat

The pendant from a souvenir badge used by the National Association of Letter Carriers 11th Annual Convention held in Detroit, September 3-8, 1900. This is the reverse side. It depicts the first Mail Boat, the "Florence B" making a delivery to a passing boat.

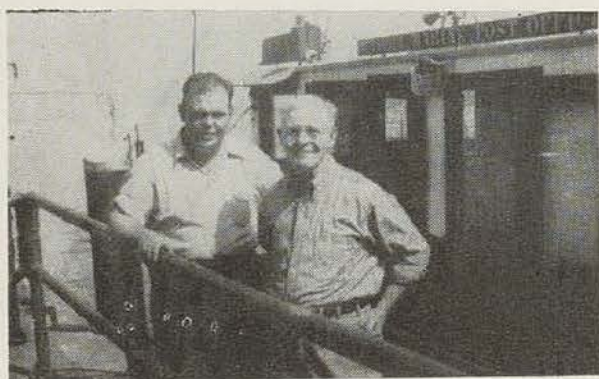


anywhere from 600 to 700 boats of today. Figuring that there are from 25 to 35 men on board each boat, it shows that there are from 20,000 to 23,000 men that can avail themselves of the service. It is now stated that about 2,000,000 pieces of mail are handled annually by the boat. Your writer has for years seen these figures mentioned in such a manner that he rather questioned the accuracy of them, but was assured that the pieces of mail going to and from the Mail Boat are actually counted.

Since 1939 the Detroit Post Office has furnished each ship a card 14 by 16 inches labeled "Lake Seamen's Postal Guide" for posting on the ship. This goes into detail as to rates, instructions, postal supplies and how to go about getting them. Registered mail cannot be delivered to the men on ships, but can be sent out. C. O. D. mail is not handled at all, the reason for these two is, that delivery requires identification and as you can easily understand, would be impossible. Money Orders are handled from freighters and special envelopes are

available for this purpose upon request. Anything like stamps or envelopes can be ordered and will be sent aboard upon the next passing of the ship. Mail for any boat which might be tied up in Detroit will be delivered alongside, if convenient, or given to a deck officer upon call at the Mail Boat's dock.

Some mail for certain ships can be made available at Sault Ste. Marie, when these boats are going through the Locks. The City Post Office maintains a branch, "Canal Station" in the U. S. Engineer's Office at the Locks, where designated ship officers may call for and send out mail. Canada also maintains the "Sault Ship Canal, Ont., P. O." at their Lock. This mentioned for record purposes only.



A "Father and Son" team. Capt. Frank Riggs, (left) and his father, Capt. John Riggs, who was one of the old time carriers. Although retired from the mail service end, he still takes his "trick" each day at the wheel.

Strange things happen and odd items have crept into the history of these various mail boats. For instance, twice it has happened officially, that there have been two boats in service at one time, ("believe it or not.") The official year of any U. S. Government contract starts at exactly midnight of June 30th, so just as the "C. F. Bielman's" time was to terminate in June of 1932, it so came about that she was out on the river delivering, so the "Becker" started out to contact other boats that were coming in sight. This same condition happened again when the "Mook" took over in 1936 at the end of the "Becker" contract.

In the preceeding pages there has been no attempt to go into anything technical; the matter of fact it has never appealed to this writer as that kind of a subject. As each season draws to a close, the lake seaman whom we named "Jack" early in this story, is the

one person who realizes most of all, the importance of this service and you can honestly see it expressed on his face when, late in the season or on the last trip, the man on the deck calls out to the carrier on the Mail Boat, "last trip" or "just one more," then on the last contact, invariably the big ship gives the little boat the old salute, "three long and two short," which is their way of saying, "we thank you for a work well done."

In all probability, had this booklet been written and printed in the conventional manner, the writer would not have been able to include a very unusual item in the history of this service. However, it so happens that this work or hobby, if you wish, has been a spare-time project, and there was still some work uncompleted in January, 1946, when on the 8th, Oliver F. Mook was injured in an automobile accident at Miami, Florida, dying February 7 from the injuries thereof. At first, it was assumed by this writer and no doubt others, that the contract would be unaffected, but, when on March 1st, new bids were asked, we learned that the existing contract had been held by Mr. Mook personally and not by his company, thus at his death it became nul and void. The Mook estate entered a new bid as did Troy Browning of the T. H. Browning & Co., the latter being awarded the contract, which had two years and three months yet to run. The boat they entered in the service was none other than the same "G. F. Becker." which held the contract from 1932 to 1936. Service started on April 8th this year at the same old location as used by the "O. F. Mook." Thus was created a situation which never occurred before in the fifty-one years of mail boat service.

In an article of this kind it would not be amiss to mention some of the persons with whom the writer has had contact while working on this subject, all of whom being very helpful. Starting with Postmaster Frank Kellogg who told the writer to go and see Mr. Peter Wiggle, who was Assistant Postmaster before he retired, down to the present Postmaster, Mr. Roscoe B. Huston and his secretary, Mr. Emil Wilson, all have been much interested and proud of the service rendered by the Mail Boat. This also applies to the men on the boat, who take a distinct pride in their work and without their help, many

an item might never have been brought to light. Marcus L. Randall, one of the "iron men" when there were wooden ships, was in this service longer than anyone else. He started on the old "Florence B" on October 1, 1895, retiring at the age of 70 on February 29, 1944. "Chub," as he is better known, was a great help in telling this writer many facts and all in all is a grand fellow. Two others with whom we had many an hour of interesting talks with, are the other "iron men," Bernard A. Gallino, (Bunnie) and John Riggs. These three had served at some time or other, on all of the four boats which have been mail boats, and were always very enthusiastic regarding this work. Gallino was retired in November 1940, Riggs on April 13, 1944. Both of them could not resist being away from the river and served as skippers on the boat for another year or two.

When the fiftieth season opened on April 13, 1944, it found William Harbaugh as the Superintendent. Now "Bill" had started in this service on the "Becker" in 1932, altho he had been in Post Office service some years previously, and was well prepared to take over. The writer has gotten to know him very well and will say that no one could be more aware of the importance of this job and at the same time, more friendly to the hundreds of collectors who write in asking for a cancellation. Really this latter fact applies to all the boys, as they generally always try to get the best possible from the cancelling device, which we have told you before, is hand



Bernard L. Gallino

operated. This fact is related so those who wish a cover with this cancel, may send it ready to go under separate envelope to "Supt. Detroit River Station, Detroit 22, Mich." and we are sure that you will get your wish. Naturally, don't send during the winter.

It would be almost impossible to obtain a complete list of the carriers who operated in this service over such a long period of time, however we want to list as many as we could learn of, many of the

following having been very friendly to the writer of these pages who wants right here to express his thanks to a grand "bunch." Starting with the Superintendents of this river service, the list reads as follows, starting with 1895: Samuel Colbert, O. Bloome, Wm. S. Winkler, Charles Jacklin, Chris Conay, Marcus L. Randall and at the present time, William Harbaugh.

The personnel of the carriers was a little harder to find and it hoped the memories of the boys is not too bad, as it was through this method the list was obtained. E. J. Carmody, Charles Jacklin, William Yates, M. L. Randall and John Hammes comprised the carriers of the first year. Then comes John Riggs, Bernard Gallino, Carl Boyer, Hans Yoki, Lovell McKenzie, Edward Stronski, George Martin, Edward Baker, J. J. Davis, Frank Backus, Homer Alverson, A. J. Bloom, W. S. Winkler, Jacob Van Dyke, Orland W. Shove, Fred F. Dergis, Charles W. Streamer, Ralph E. Gates, Viateur Clement, George Murphy, Lewis B. Niendorf, Frank A. Chelius and Michael Kintziger.



William Harbaugh

This listing would not be complete without giving recognition to a group of men who, while they are not in employ of the government, are a very important part of the service. These of course, are the Captains of the Mail Boats who in many cases had been in the Postal service, or vice versa. Starting with 1895, Captains: Charles Merkel, Frank Hilliger, Bernard Gallino, George A. Riggs, John H. Ivers, John H. Riggs, Edward J. Baker, Joseph Flaherty, William Scherer, Edward McGowan, George A. Hall, W. A. Riggs, Chester Inches, H. A. Beattie, Walter H. Mahon, James Mahon, John Holt, Francis Riggs, George Mays, Thomas Mays and George Manz.

This is the story of the Mail Boat of Detroit River and these are the men who have operated it for over fifty years. They have every reason to be very proud of their remarkable record, not a loss of

of life or a serious accident during its existence, we must admit this is very unusual and is a great credit to the type of men who have been connected with it. Again we wish to say, while there may be other mail boats, we know of no other rendering this same service.

The year just past, (1946) was one quite full of exciting experiences for those on the "Becker," none of which we can relate here however. It was with this thought in mind that the writer held up the finishing of this booklet, hoping to have some real news to wind up with, but such is not to be, we find. The service will start about April 7th depending on conditions, and the Superintendent will be Hans Yoki, who has served as a carrier there for several years, William Harbaugh having been transferred to an inspectorship with his headquarters at Detroit's down town Post Office. We wish both of them every success in their new positions.

Right here, as we close, it is only fitting that in rendering our thanks to the men in this service for their help, that we also mention two others; Fred M. Wert of the "Detroit Free Press," who obtained one or two photos used herein and James V. Oxtoby, who improvised the little poem printed on the frontispiece. Both were members of the Detroit Philatelic Society, of which the writer is also a member. Neither lived to see this booklet finished, but their interest was very helpful.



